

Rome News-Tribune

Dec 1, 2000

10090708



Environmental agency: Firm wrong in PCB statements

By Jason Landers
Rome News-Tribune Staff Writer
JLanders@RN-T.com / 298-5271

The Environmental Protection Agency says General Electric was inaccurate about polychlorinated biphenyl levels when company representatives said, "EPA has taken the position that a level of 10 parts per million in your yard is acceptable."

The statement by Richard Lester, plant manager in charge of cleanup at the company's closed medium transformers plant, was made during a Nov. 16 public hearing in Rome. The federal agency cites a similar statement by GE spokesman Gary Sheffer in a Nov. 19 letter to the editor published in the Rome News-Tribune.

"These statements are inaccurate," wrote Elmer Akin, chief of the Region IV EPA Office of Technical Services.

Sheffer and Lester were referencing a recent administrative order in which EPA established a 10 ppm standard as a trigger for removing contaminated soils in Anniston, Ala. When the officials made their references, they were discussing low levels of contamination at West Central Elementary School, which shares a drainage ditch with GE and has had a PCB reading of 7.7 ppm — a level below the 10 ppm trigger in Anniston. Lester also mentioned the standard when discussing local residential areas.

In Anniston composite residential PCB levels above 10 ppm are removed because government toxicologists believe levels in yards above the reading "may pose immediate threats to public health," Akin wrote.

If residential levels exceed 10 ppm in Anniston, the top foot of soil is cleaned to a level of 2 ppm. The agency may require more stringent standards, even lower than 2 ppm,

when the final cleanup goal is established. "EPA has not yet determined that final cleanup level," Akin wrote.

Of Akin's comments, Sheffer said, "I think we (GE and EPA) are splitting hairs technically. The current trigger level is 10 parts per million and that's the point we are making to show the relatively low levels at the school. It is below the trigger level for clean-ups used at residences in Anniston, Ala., and that remains to be an accurate statement."

Sheffer repeated the company's well publicized criticism of the agency with regards to the risk PCBs pose, saying there are no "peer reviewed" studies linking the hazardous waste to cancer in humans. He added he is unaware of any peer-reviewed studies linking the probable human carcinogen to non-cancerous health risks in people.

GE has begun cleaning properties with low levels of contamination that are above the Anniston standard, as was witnessed in recent soil removals at Tolbert Park and at a home where a mixture of PCBs, trichlorobenzenes and tetrachlorobenzenes was poured around the foundation as a termite deterrent. This mixture is known by its trade name Pyranol and was sold to an undetermined number of GE employees between 1953 and 1969.

In all the company has tested four residential properties where former employees were suspected of using waste Pyranol.

Two had undetectable levels. One had negligible levels, and the one that was cleaned had a high level of 48 ppm.

State officials say they have received about 50 leads that may require further investigation of Pyranol use around homes in the Rome area. The state is working with GE and EPA to establish an appropriate testing and action procedure for the homes.

CONTACT US